

# **ON THE FORGOTTEN SIKHS' TRAIL**

Sikligar Sikhs

**Jagmohan Singh**

a Monograph presented  
at the seminar on  
**SIKHS LIVING IN OTHER STATES OUTSIDE PUNJAB**  
organised by  
Institute of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh  
24-25 October 2009

## Contents

No.	Topic	Page
1	Preamble	3
2	Introduction	3
3	Origin of Sikligar Sikhs	4
4	Pre-British Times of the Sikligar Sikhs	6
5	Post-British Times of the Sikligar Sikhs	7
6	Numerical Strength of Sikligar Sikhs	8
7	Language of Sikligar Sikhs	9
8	Sikligar Sikhs' Habitat	12
9	Role and Status of Sikligar Sikh Women	13
10	Sikligar Sikhs and November 1984	14
11	Apostasy amongst present day Sikligar Sikhs	15
12	Sikligar Sikhs and the Indian State	16
13	Sikligar Sikhs and local Sikh communities	17
14	Sikligar Sikhs in Pune	18
15	"Sikhs are not poor"	19
16	Funding Education of Sikligar Sikhs	20
17	Education versus Artisanship of Sikligars	20
18	The Road Ahead	21
19	What Should the Institute of Sikh Studies do?	22
20	The Last Word, almost	23
21	References	24
22	About the Author	25

# On the Forgotten Sikhs' Trail

## Jagmohan Singh

**1. Preamble:** I am grateful to the Institute of Sikh Studies for the privileged opportunity to share my observations about the life and times of a section of Sikhs living outside Punjab, whose existence has been eclipsed from the memory and consciousness of the Sikh community over the last few centuries.

My story of the Forgotten Sikhs is that of the Sikligar Sikhs, fortunately who are forgotten no more. It is the remarkable story of Forgotten Sikhs who have not forgotten their roots. Due to the active intervention of some dedicated individuals and organizations -the Sikligar Sikhs, or more appropriately, the Sikhs with the Sikligar background have come into focus over the last decade. It is their trait of adherence to the fundamentals of Sikhi despite all odds, which has prompted me to take up their study.

**2. Introduction:** My search for the Sikligar Sikhs started a year ago, when around this time last year, I visited the Sholapur dera (habitat) of the Sikligar Sikhs there. In the last one year (since then I have travelled extensively to many more areas of living of the Sikligars), I have visited the habitats of these traditional weapon-makers and weapon-polishers in Hyderabad, Bangalore, Mysore, Pune, Gwalior, Dabra, Ludhiana, Jaipur, Alwar and very recently in the Sultanpuri area of Delhi.

Some twenty-five years ago, as a student activist, I had visited a Sikligar Sikh dera in Nagpur for the first time alongwith with a local activist. The image that still stays in my mind is that of poor and determined Sikhs, hardworking, taking easily to liquor in the evenings to overcome the fatigue due to their rigorous work and the families having many children. In fact, Sardar Uppal's words -“they are a very hardworking and virile people, who have not forgotten their roots though they know only about Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh and the Granth Sahib” still resonate in my ears.

I am neither a social scientist nor an anthropologist. I do not have the training of a historian, though I do claim to have a sense of history. I am not a linguist, but my love for languages has provided some peculiar insights into the linguistic skills of the Sikligar Sikhs. My present observations and recommendations are purely as that of a social and human rights activist. It is my wont that whatever little be done, should be carried out in a meticulous and consistent manner and I have been attempting to do so with the case of Sikligar Sikhs too.

My observations about the Sikhs with the Sikligar background would have the factualness of field research, the diligence of an academic and the investigative touch of a journalist. They are based on contemporary oral sources and some occasional references to earlier published pioneering works. I am conscious and I admit at the outset that my findings are based on preliminary work and much more remains to be done in most areas of the vast canvass and I urge your involvement in further exploration of the hypotheses enumerated and elucidated by me. My suggestions and recommendations for the amelioration of the lives of the Sikligars, the education, empowerment and employment of their children are that of an activist in a hurry to change and transform lives. They are practical in nature and may have some pitfalls of overlooking some sociological and anthropological issues, which at this preliminary stage of my research, I may not have appropriately comprehended. I seek the active indulgence of all concerned to bear with me and point out to me issues and hypotheses which may not be upto the mark, for which I take sole responsibility.

**3. Origin of Sikligar Sikhs:** I am not enamoured by the wishful and subjective thinking of some activists and scholars that the Sikligar Sikhs have been associates of Sikhs and Sikhism right from the times of Guru Nanak. If this is to be held true, then there is need for some serious anthropological and historical research into this unexplored facet of Sikh history and the Sikh faith.

Etymologically speaking, *Sikligar* is a Persian/Arabic word, comprising *Saiqal* + *gar* meaning, '*polisher/burnisher/furbisher of weapons*'. From weapon polishers -the Sikalgars, over the centuries turned weapon-makers. In the Indian Express of 21 January 2009, columnist Moiz Mannan Haque in an article has called them Samurai Sikhs. His description of the Sikligar Sikhs in village Talegaon of Maharashtra is classic and I quote,

“Khadak Singh Joone has lost count of the years he has lived. “I'm a hundred and ten,” he says, more by way of a question, as he peers through thick glasses which haven't been wiped for probably that long.

He caresses a country-made muzzle-loader gun as if it were his only child and takes pride in whipping out his firearms licence issued by the Government of Bombay under a GR of September 17, 1895.

He has acquired the surname 'Joone' not because he's so old but because he was the first one in a settlement of more than 400 in the tiny highway village of Talegaon, about 90 km from Nagpur.

Khadak Singh is a Sikh. He swears by the Gurus and the Granth Sahib. He adorns the kesh, kangha, kirpan, kachha and kada. But the similarity with the popular image of a 'Sardarji' ends there.

He does not know a word of Punjabi nor can he read the Gurmukhi. He's dark-skinned and he's very, very poor.

He's a Sikligar. This tribe, with its roots in Rajasthan, lives in scattered pockets in central and eastern Maharashtra. ....

Isolation and poverty have made them wary of strangers. Once inside the settlement, an outsider gets the feeling of having travelled back in time -by a few centuries."

Where did they come from? When did the Sikligars become Sikhs? Over the last year, I did not get any firm answers either from the Sikligars or from activists working in the field. Two schools of thought that are in currency are that they came in touch with the Sikhs, first at the time of Guru Hargobind Sahib and then at the time of Guru Gobind Singh. Prior to that, they were residents of the Marwar area of present day Rajasthan. Anthropologist Sher Singh Sher, in his magnum opus, *The Sikligars of Punjab*, which is the only such study of its kind, asserts both the theories. The work of Sher Singh Sher, published way back in 1966, is according to the author, 'the first effort to study the Sikligars' and according to him, 'the Sikligars are a gypsy tribe'.

Though which of the two periods mentioned above -movement to Punjab at the time of Guru Hargobind Sahib or during that of Guru Gobind Singh is true or is it that both are true may be a subject of discussion, but the language spoken by the Sikligar Sikhs, clearly points out to the fact that they were originally residents of Marwar. A young Sikh activist provided a very interesting angle, which certainly needs more exploration. He surmised that the Sikligars may have first come in touch with the House of Guru Nanak, when Guru Hargobind Sahib visited Gwalior and the other is that they may have associated with Gurughar, when Guru Gobind Singh Ji visited Nanded. If either of this is true, it leads us to the corollary which needs historical study and that is, whether the Sikligar Sikhs came to Punjab or did they actually join the path of Sikhism when the respective Gurus traveled through their lands.

The Sikligar Sikhs living in the states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are not sure about this. All they know is that "our fore-fathers were traditional weapon-makers, so are we and we have come from Nanded. The one thing that has surely been passed on from one generation to the other is

*“kesh sambhal ke rakhne hai, in fact, it is “Kesh nahi kaatne hai, chahe jaan chali jaaye.”* This and this alone is the message that they have received and passed on from one generation to another and to me this vastly explains their adherence to the fundamentals of Sikhism. This is our proud heritage.

The Sikligars living in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi trace their origin to Rajasthan, though they too are more aware of their pre-British and post-British pasts only.

It is therefore safe to say that the Sikligars were traditional weapon polishers and weapon makers, who were influenced by Sikh thought, who have retained the essence of Sikhi over the last few centuries, even though they have been leading lives of wanderers, selling their wares and skills to whosoever needs them.

[Noted historian, author, chronicler and fellow-traveller in this field](#), Nanak Singh Nishter while talking about Sikligar Sikhs says, “For generations, they were master armourers and armoury manufacturers, their skill known far and wide. With change in technology of warfare, availability of new arms and armaments, strict restrictions on the general making of arms, these master craftsmen, were forced to become highly skilled blacksmiths. Today, they make household utensils and other agricultural equipments from scrap iron.”

**4. Pre-British times of the Sikligar Sikhs:** The mobility of the Sikligar Sikhs combined with their artisanship as weapon makers, made them the cynosure of the eyes of the British. While I have yet to understand their status and role during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, or even before that during the times of Baba Banda Singh Bahadur, it is quite clear from my interviews with the elderly Sikligar Sikhs in Ludhiana, Alwar and Sultanpuri in Delhi that a large number of them were living in various areas of the present-day Pakistan, namely Multan and Sindh, particularly various villages of Sindh. Even today, some of the elderly migrants speak fluent Sindhi, apart from their own spoken language and dialects. Nihal Singh, the eighty year old Granthi Singh of the Gurdwara Sahib in Sultanpuri, the seventy-two year old man from Alwar - Hargun Singh (who knew the names of his grandfather and great grandfather for 8 generations, namely Gharib Singh, Hari Singh, Bhauja Singh, Nagaya Seonh, Chattar Seon, Poohla Seon, Chatru and then Bhartu) both tell me the interesting story of their travels, which has been validated by many others I spoke to. The story narrated in the subsequent paragraphs is fascinating and contains the seeds of more research work.

**5. Post-British times of the Sikligar Sikhs:** In search of work and to evade the onslaught of the British police personnel -as the British used to hound and

harass them, the Sikligars were forced to move from one place to another because of their weapon-making skills. With hardly any money and fixed assets, those of them who were not weapon-makers, also kept wandering from one temporary abode to another in search of work or market for their tools and implements. While it is generally said and believed that like the Vanjaras, even the Sikligars were also declared a Criminal Tribe under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 by the British, the fact is otherwise. In the introductory chapter of his book, *The Sikligars of Punjab*, Sher Singh Sher states that, “But to the good luck of the Sikligars, they were not included in the Criminal Tribes Act and though they are one of the most wandering and well-known Gypsy tribes of Northern India, they have never been stigmatized with the bad odour of criminals.” Therefore, one thing is certain that they were forced to disperse by the British, which imperialistic policy is still continued by the Indian police in various states of the country. However, I must add here that in the state of Maharashtra, in the town of Sholapur, I have seen certificates issued to very few of them as a nomadic tribe and this prompts me to think that there is more to it than meets the eye.

Most of the Sikhs settled in Alwar city, the villages around it and those living in Sultanpuri, Delhi -which witnessed one of the worst massacres during the November 1984 anti-Sikh carnage, have come from Mirpur, Sindh in erstwhile Pakistan. Nihal Singh son of Ditta Singh son of Veer Singh son of Sadhu Singh - the veteran Granthi, who with his son, at the full risk to his life, saved three Saroops of Guru Granth Sahib on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1984, when police-led mobs attacked the Gurdwara Sahib in Sultanpuri, told me that before and after the partition, when the migration had started, they stayed put there in a place, whose name he could not recall, under the protection and patronage of a local Muslim leader, for nearly a year.

When they realized that after the death of the ailing Muslim leader (that he was a very good Syed Chowdhary is all he could recall and that he was a very good person who had a large land-holding and who had told them, “nobody will touch you in and around 50 kilometres here”), they would be unsafe, they made arrangements for migration. From Sindh, they traveled by train and road to Karachi, from Karachi by ship to Mumbai, (Nihal Singh was then 17 years old and married to Hazra Kaur) where they stayed for nearly three-four months at the Kalyan Rehabilitation Camp. Then the tribe split and some settled around Mumbai whereas all others after traveling to Jodhpur, Jaipur (stayed there for about 8 months), finally settled in Alwar where each family was allotted 16 acres of land by the government, the lands being of those Muslims who had fled the areas during the partition. As they had never done agriculture, and according to some, the atmosphere too was hostile, they either sold their lands or just gifted it away or simply left without doing



anything. Surprisingly, Nihal Singh told me that while he was in Sindh, he used to do agricultural activities on a contract basis.

To earn their livelihood, they went here and there, including various parts of Delhi. He and his wife partook of *Amrit* along with hundreds of other Sikhs at an *Amrit Parchar* ceremony organized by Master Tara Singh at Gurdwara Bangla Sahib. They settled in Prem Nagar and Anand Parbat areas of Delhi till the government allotted them pigeon-hole houses, worse than Russian ghettos in Sultanpuri in 1977, from where again some of them were killed and some uprooted in November 1984. Nihal Singh told me that from Sindh upto their stay in Prem Nagar, Delhi, they never had pucca houses and were essentially wanderers. Though he could not confirm, he told me that his ancestors had gone from Punjab to Rajasthan and not the other way around. This aspect certainly needs more verification. Another noteworthy fact that he proudly narrated is that his maternal uncle used to teach him Gurmukhi and Punjabi and his four sons are proficient in performing *Kirtan* playing the harmonium and tabla, even though they are not professional *Kirtaniyas*. According to him, more than 80 Sikligar Sikhs were killed in the A block of Sultanpuri in November 1984.

I also learnt that some of the Sikligar residents of Sultanpuri are contesting the case of usurpation of their lands in Alwar either by vested government interests, anti-social elements and the land mafia, in various courts of Delhi.

**6. Numerical Strength of Sikligar Sikhs:** In the preface of his book, *The Sikligars of Punjab*, Sher Singh Sher says, “In the beginning I tried to consult the data already available in anthropological and sociological literature, but nothing at all was available about them. The Census Reports are usually a great source of anthropological information, but the Sikligars have not been recorded separately in any Census Report of Punjab.”

Frankly speaking, I am not infatuated with the numerical strength of Sikligar Sikhs which some of our writers, activists, organisations and Panthic thinkers are fond of narrating and even boasting about. There is no doubt that in current times, political strength is measured via numbers, but I am sure and that you will agree with me that more than numbers, it is the strength of character of the Sikligar Sikhs or any Sikh that should concern us. Whether they are in millions or thousands, it should be the priority of all of us here, concerned about the welfare of the Sikh nation, to do our bit, to do more than our bit for the safety, education, empowerment, employment and development of each Sikligar Sikh -man, woman and child. Numbers will automatically take care of themselves.



As there has been no census study of any kind -big or small about their numbers, all talk of numbers is either in the realm of wishful thinking or speculation based on hearsay or statements of political and social activists without basis.

To my knowledge, in post-1947 India, the first survey of any kind was done in the last year and a half, by the National Commission for Minorities under the initiative of its member Harcharan Singh Josh. The report of the NCM on the Sikligar Sikhs, Vanjaras and others is still to be tabled in parliament and still to be made public. However, as per my information, the team of enumerators of the NCM visited 286 centres of settlement of the Sikligar Sikhs in the whole country. A rough idea and understanding of these centres makes me calculate that there are an equal number of centres which could not be covered by the NCM, and which should be made part of a future survey and research project. Nevertheless, the National Commission for Minorities and Harcharan Singh Josh in particular deserve kudos for the project and I hope that Sardar Josh will endeavour to ensure that the Government of India pursues the report and its implementation with the same gusto and vigour as it is doing with the Justice Rajinder Sachhar report on the Muslims.

As I said above, there are many rough estimates of the numbers of Sikligar Sikhs and I find it disturbing to narrate them or even refer to them. It is my considered view that all organizations and activists working for the welfare of Sikligar Sikhs should reach a meeting of minds to conduct the community's own demographic survey rather than continue to harp on half-baked statistics.

**7. Languages of Sikligar Sikhs:** One of the most fascinating features of the Sikligar Sikhs is their language, which to my knowledge has not been explored adequately. Across the spectrum that I visited, I found that they speak multiple languages -the local language where they have their settlement, a smattering of Hindi, Sikligari and their peculiar internal language.

What they speak at home amongst themselves is their own Sikligari language. Irrespective of what they speak outside their homes, they speak Sikligari amongst their families and clan. I have recorded some conversations in Bangalore and Alwar. As I have said earlier that though I am not a linguist, I have understood that this spoken language is the most common link amongst all Sikligar Sikhs. I have spoken to many Sikligar Sikhs and those working with them and I find that this language is a mixture of Marwari, Hindi with a sprinkling of Punjabi thrown in. It is my guess that around 70 percent of it is Marwari, some 10-15 percent Hindi and the rest Punjabi, wherein the Punjabi portion includes substantial vocabulary from Gurbani.

Those of them, who have come from Sindh like the ones living in Sultanpuri and Alwar, speak Sindhi too. Some in Ludhiana remember some remnants of Multani.

Another remarkable trait about the Sikligar Sikhs is the language which they are fond of calling as their “secret code language”. This language is called *Parsee*. No non-Sikligar can understand it. I have recorded this and played it over and over again without understanding a syllable about it. The Sikligars say this and I too believe that this language was developed over the centuries so that they could protect their skills as weapon makers, as they were always in confrontation with the state -the Mughals, the British and now the police in post-1947 India in their various communes.

Kirpal Kazak in his monumental work, *Sikligar Kabeele da Sabhyachar*, based entirely on field research and surveys, says that it is taboo for the Sikligar Sikhs to let others know about the *Parsee* language. He further says that there is a quip current amongst Sikligars that if and when this language is understood by non-Sikligars, this tribe would be wiped out. After befriending them and learning from them, he has compiled a sample list of words and sentences of the *Parsee* language spoken by them in his book published by the Punjabi University Patiala. On the basis of his in-depth interaction with the elders of the community, he states that this secret language is passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth alone.

Kirpal Kazak’s research was published in 1990 and was based on field work done at least five years or may be more time before that. I would like to say that since then, much has changed. In Bangalore, Alwar and elsewhere, I found that the youngsters could speak and understand *Parsee*, whereas in Sultanpuri, Delhi, like the incidence of apostasy, the strains of tradition had weakened and the young were unable to speak and write *Parsee* and in some cases even Sikligari too, both of which have no prescribed script and are only spoken languages. One middle-aged Sikh rued the fact that the *Parsee* dialect would die with him. However, a young Sikligar activist in Alwar, trained in Gurmat at the Gurmat Gian Missionary College, Ludhiana and zealously working as a missionary in Alwar, Jaipur and Sirsa confirmed the findings of Kirpal Kazak and said that there was no danger to the language dying out. On his own initiative, he has done the preliminary work of writing Sikligari words in the Gurmukhi script.

The names of Sikligar men and women, boys and girls are also unique -I have hardly found a name with more than two syllables, as was the case with most Sikh names of yore.

In search of the Sikligar Sikhs, during my visit to Mysore, I visited and spent time at the Central Institute of Indian Languages. I had a brief but sufficient interaction with the team there that helps document rare, disappearing and spoken languages. I saw how they record, listen, re-listen, and break-up languages into syllables to decipher their origin and growth.

An issue which bothers me is whether it is wise to document this spoken language which the Sikligars consider to be their guarded heritage and which is traditionally transmitted from one generation to generation? I am not sure. Dr. Himadri Banerjee tells me that their language is an intellectual armoury and even an inner protection wall.

However, I would like to reiterate that to me an understanding of their languages seems to be a key to many sociological and historical issues connected with the Sikligar Sikhs.

It is my considered view that an understanding of *Sikligari* and particularly *Parsee* languages can provide us totally new vistas of knowledge about the origin, settlement and history of the Sikligar Sikhs. The work of Kirpal Kazak and Sher Singh Sher in this context needs to be followed up.

**8. Sikligar Sikhs Habitat:** The Sikligar Sikhs live in deras and each of these deras comprises of extended families of one or two elderly grandfathers still living as heads of the deras. The elderly sitting on charpoys appear to be idling but are quietly monitoring the affairs of everyone and are very fond of saying, “*Yeh saare mere daade ke parivar ke log hain.*”

Most of them live on encroached government land, which had been lying vacant since decades. Now the government and the land mafia are pressuring them to go “elsewhere.”

Those living in Sultanpuri were allotted houses (if you can call a house of 22 square yards to be a home) by the Indira Gandhi government, after their eviction from Prem Nagar in 1977. In this one room, one kitchen and one bathroom house, with toilets at a distance of 200 yards or more as public toilets, live more than 7-10 members of the family. Just outside the house, at the door is the small coal-based foundry which is their main source of living. They work outside their homes in perpetual fear that the pollution-control bodies of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi will not impose penalty, harass and arrest them. In this day and age, when animal activists talk of dignity of animals, while they are transported from one place to another, I feel ashamed of myself writing about this sorry state of state of affairs of the Sikligar Sikhs

living in Sultanpuri. Recently, when volunteers of Sikhs Helping Sikhs visited Sultanpuri and took cudgels to rebuild the Gurdwara there, they posted a video on You Tube called, Slumdog Sikhs. A Sikh scholar protested at the nomenclature for he had not been there. To be honest and terse, and to drive the point home about the abysmal conditions, it would not be wrong to classify their hamlets as Cattle Class.

In Mysore they live in an area, which is officially called Hutments and I saw that on their Voter Identity Cards. In Sholapur they live in mud-thatched huts, where the conditions of sanitation are such that it is an open invitation to environment-ridden epidemics. In Alwar they live on land adjacent to the Railways; they were paying rent at the rate of Rs. 2 per house till some years ago, have stopped paying and now live in perpetual fear of eviction.

A significant feature of their lives in post-1947 India is that they are no longer nomads. They may be going to other towns and cities in search of a market for their iron utensils and implements, but they have now more or less chosen their habitat and are sticking to it for the last two-three decades.

An important deviation from their century old gypsy tradition is that now, despite difficulties they want to live a settled life. This new trend needs to be studied as well as may become a base point for initiating measures for their overall progress without compromising their core ethnic habits, traditions and customs. They do not want to go out in search of jobs too. Also, they want work of the kind that they have been doing over the centuries and preferably right near to their settlements. With some exposure to the bigger world, they see the possibilities of better jobs, but are still hesitant to make an adventure. However, if one particular clan is asked to resettle lock, stock and barrel, they would move out, if there are compelling reasons to do so, for the inherent gypsy-like trait is still there. The young and old told, in many places me in no uncertain terms that “if they are made to move out *en masse* to a better place, they would.”

In Bangalore, due to the efforts of the Karnataka Sikh Welfare Society and Delhi-based Nishkam, some families now have near-decent accommodation, but all activist organizations realize that the task of housing is daunting and monumental, yet needs to be done.

Just as education is a primary need for children of Sikligar Sikhs, so is the need for housing. In all the areas I visited, no Sikligar Sikh has had benefit from any of the government housing schemes for weaker sections of society. Bodies engaged in education are conscious of the needs for good housing and requirements of sanitation and hygienic living, but paucity of resources,

negligence by the government as they do not have a voice, illiteracy, being dubbed as “denotified people” -all these and more factors combine to force them to live in such appalling conditions.

**9. Role and status of Sikligar Sikh Women:** While the level of education of the Sikligars in general is extremely low, that of Sikligar Sikh women is virtually negligible. Only in the last few years, one has seen young girls going to schools. They are rarely sent to colleges and thus their education ceases at standard tenth or in some rare cases at twelfth class.

From what I have seen and heard, the average marriage-age of Sikligar Sikh women is around 14 years. Though this is illegal, it keeps happening with impunity as they live within the confines of their introvert settlements. Boys are to be married before their beards sprout, for a bearded boy is considered “too old” for marriage. In Pune, just a month and a half back, I came across the case of engagement of a ten year old boy with a girl younger to him.

In Alwar, I also came across some young girls who boldly told me that some boys and men of their clan are averse to their studying and therefore they had quit school as well as the local Punjabi classes run by Tarif Singh and his colleagues. However, I think that this is an aberration as in the adjacent colony, I was happy to listen to a mother who said, “Four of my children go to school and I am proud about it. I had studied till class eight before marriage and I am determined that my children study more than that.”

With their heads covered with Dupattas all the time, the Sikligar women work in unison with their husbands and in some places go out of homes to do menial jobs to make a living. There is absolutely no gender discrimination and in case a family does not have a daughter by birth, a girl-child is adopted. Surely, Sikhs in Punjab and the Diaspora, particularly those committing foeticide have an example to emulate.

In Sultanpuri there was talk of widow remarriage, otherwise in all other deras it was said that widow remarriage is traditionally not done. In Sholapur, I met a woman, who was a widow at a young age, but even with a kid in tow, she said that she wanted to maintain her self-respect and dignity and would not ask for help from the men around, unless there is some urgent dire need. With her child in her lap, she keeps beating iron to eke out a living.

It is pertinent here to narrate the experience of Akhar SOH activists in Sholapur. With their active intervention with the community there, the incidence of girls marrying at a young age has come down. The activists are

now active associates in fixing marriage dates and deciding the names of new-born progeny.

**10. Sikligar Sikhs and November 1984:** While the Sikhs commemorate twenty-five years of the anti-Sikh pogrom this week, reminiscing 1984, I came across unprecedented pain, anguish and suffering of the Sikligar Sikhs. The death and destruction of Sikligar Sikhs as a class of Sikhs attacked during November 1984 needs a more thorough and detailed study and analysis and I am doing so. I have found that all those Sikligars, who were able to present a picture of strength and portray themselves as strong weapon-keeping Sikhs, were able to protect themselves, whereas others, steeped in poverty and visibly vulnerable in their settlements, were brutally attacked and killed in Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and even in certain parts of Maharashtra, though the numbers in all other areas except Delhi was small.

When a large number of Sikligar Sikhs were attacked and killed in a well-planned massacre in Block A of Sultanpuri, the others fled and went to Alwar, their original base of the forties, in the first week of November 1984. Subsequently, the widows of Block A were given compensation and allotted houses in Tilak Vihar, whereas those who suffered monetary losses, with their home and hearth destroyed, came back to charred remains and started life again from scratch. Once again the journey from zero had started for these Sikligar Sikhs.

Sultanpuri, today mocks at the Sikh nation. Sultanpuri is only one of the many deras, where these beloved traditional weapon makers, the Sikligar Sikhs - the protectors of Sikh honour and dignity, were made sitting ducks in an organized manner, which has shattered not only their lives but has become instrumental in the elders letting their children shorn their hair, forgetting their age-old message passed onto them from generation to generation - *Kesh nahi katane hai, chahe jaan chali jaaye*. During my recent visit to Sultanpuri, I forced myself not to cry. Generally the parents express helplessness and the womenfolk are the ones who are most saddened by this situation. Their plea to me was, *"hamare bacchon ko kissi tarah kesh rakhana sikha do, hamko bahut sharam aati hai."* They say so because though the shadow of fear of November 1984 is no more, atleast on the surface, it has become an easy excuse for the young ones who go out in search of work and livelihood. Anyone who visits Sultanpuri will not blame them. Their existence can put anyone to shame. I recognize that it is high time for our religio-political institutions to intervene comprehensively and completely, before it is too late.

The most disturbing fact is that no premier Sikh organisation has ever visited them since 1984. These Sikhs are at the mercy of the local politician and the



conscientious Sikh or Sikh organisation which occasionally visits them to provide solace and succour.

In this monograph, I have presented my observations regarding Sultanpuri, but I am working on visiting, collecting details and creating awareness about the situation of Sikligar Sikhs in Tilak Vihar, Mongolpuri, Trilokpuri and Kalyanpuri areas of Delhi. Apart from these, there are many more small centres of Sikligars in Delhi.

**11. Apostasy amongst present-day Sikligar Sikhs:** Historically, they have preserved the outward appearance of Sikhi so remarkably well, particularly outside Punjab. In Punjab, however, some numbers in Ludhiana and I am told that many in Moga and Patiala, which I have not visited so far, have been deeply influenced by the neo-Nirankaris and a handful by Christianity too. The Guru Angad Dev Educational and Welfare Council with support from other organisations is making Herculean efforts to reverse the trend.

While the prevalence of apostasy is palpably visible in Delhi, Gwalior, Jaipur and to a very small extent in Alwar, it must be mentioned that the situation in many areas of Maharashtra and Chattishgarh is diametrically opposite. In these places, it is very difficult to locate a Sikligar Sikh with shorn hair. In Pune, where the Sikligar Sikh population is nearly 5000 plus, it is difficult to find a *patit*, though they live and survive under very trying circumstances. Even those in prison have not shorn their hair.

Ravinder Singh, activist of Akhar SOH, made a significant observation –“the life patterns of other Sikhs living around the Sikligar Sikhs must be studied to discern the impact on the lives on the Sikligar Sikhs.” This organisation is working in the interiors of Maharashtra in Sholapur, Ichalkaranji, Srirampur, Jalgaon, Pune, Gwalior, Dabra and Alwar. He told me during my visit to Bangalore that activists of this organisation have rarely found anyone with shorn beard, leave alone someone with shorn hair. He and others had a sad observation to make, “the nearer to Punjab, the more the chances and incidences of apostasy.” I too found that to be true during my visit to the Sikligar Sikh dera in Ludhiana and in Sultanpuri, Delhi. This certainly is food for thought.

**12. Sikligar Sikhs and the Indian State:** There are many castes and sub-castes amongst the Sikligar Sikhs and the castes determine their work. Some of the castes that I have come across are: Joone, Tankk, Mundran wale Tankk, Soor wale Tankk, Bichuu wale Tankk, Kalani, Budhani, Burhani, Dangi, Tilpatiya, Bahda, Bawri -Churrimar Bawri, Andrele Bawri, Bhond and Khichi.



As far as I know, the government of India denotified the Sikligars in 1952, even though they themselves were never classified as “criminal tribes” according to Sher Singh Sher. As they live in ghettos without a voice, they are nomadic tribes in some states, backward class in yet another and scheduled castes in some others.

The bureaucracy of the country, in almost all states, in deference to the notion that any turbaned and bearded person who is a Sikh, cannot be poor, refuse to acknowledge their caste as well as economic status. A large section of them being illiterate too, cannot negotiate their way through the corrupt systems and therefore are devoid of BPL (below poverty line) certificates, caste certificates and in some cases ration cards too -all of which are essentials for obtaining government benefits of all kinds -educational scholarships, loans from the National Minority Development Corporation or the Scheduled Castes Development Corporation and housing under various government schemes.

Even during the last census, they were classified as “others” for no fault of theirs as despite their Sikh appearance the enumerators did not enlist them accordingly. Mohinder Singh of the Mohali-based Vanjara Trust, working for guidance and empowerment of all weaker sections for the last few decades has prepared elaborate guidelines and would soon let the Sikh world know as to what needs to be done in this regard.

A massive country-wide movement needs to take place to ensure that each Sikligar family gets the much-needed certificates, and all other facilities, grants, loans, scholarships and housing from their respective state governments and the Union government.

### **13. Sikligar Sikhs and local Sikh communities:**

Though I have not come across any marked discrimination of the Sikligar Sikhs by the community at large in all the towns and cities where I visited the Sikligar Sikh deras, I could perceive a clear sense of neglect by the mainstream Sikh community. Somehow, working for the poor does not seem to be on our agenda. Somehow, working for the so-called lower castes or those different from the majority, does not seem to catch our fancy.

This attitude to a very large extent explains the abandonment of the Sikligar Sikhs over the centuries. Their visibility is definitely acknowledged by even those who may not know anything about their background. We are aware of the *Taale-Chaabi wale Sikhs*, but never does it occur to know more about them, isn't it?

Our Gurdwara Parbandhak Committees are conscious of their existence and the stark realities of the Sikligar Sikhs and I exhort them to catch the bull by its horns before they goes astray and then we start another tale of regret and add it to our litany of grievances.

When the Sikligars themselves or activists approach the mainstream Sikh leaders for their empowerment they get a positive verbal assurance and no more. Like government departments, they do not want to accept the fact that Sikhs can be poor and underprivileged. Some of them take the holier than thou approach and question the issue of seeking caste certificates from the government departments for Sikhs, claiming that Sikhism propagates a casteless society.

For the present, I am convinced, that till the Sikh community in its collective wisdom and resourcefulness cannot arrange massive resources for the rejuvenation of Sikhi amongst the Sikligars, till then it is inappropriate and impractical to question the need for caste certificates. Undoubtedly, Sikh society does not propagate a caste system, but why should only the lowliest of low, whom Guru Nanak befriended, be segregated for the implementation of this system?

**14. Sikligar Sikhs in Pune:** There are a few interesting and noteworthy features of the Sikligar Sikhs of Pune, which deserves a special mention. It is interesting to note and mention that the popular English-medium school, - Guru Nanak Public School, ably run by Dr. Harminder Kaur (since deceased) within the precincts of the Camp Gurdwara in Pune, is perhaps the only Sikh school in the whole country which provides education and other basic amenities to the children of Sikligar Sikhs free of cost in a special section created especially for them. All this is done because the key sewadar, Parkash Singh Ghai feels that *“they have preserved Sikhi, it is time we preserve them.”*

Then there are around thirty young Sikligar Sikhs, in the age group of 20-30, who have been working as Caddies in the Poona Golf Club for the last decade or so. They work as caddies in the mornings and evenings and double up as ironsmiths on lean days to augment family income. It was the goodwill generated by these hardworking young *Saabat Soorat* handsome Sikhs that convinced soft-spoken, unassuming local businessman and social activist, Ikram Khan, fondly called *Bhaijaan* by the young boys, to experiment with these young Sikhs living in shanties and slums next to the Golf course. He was told about the resourcefulness and hard work of these Sikhs by the Director General of Police of Maharashtra K K Kashyap in the early nineties of the last century. Earning some hundred rupees a day, these young golfers, proudly say

that they know all the nuances of this “rich man’s game” and desire to become players and trainers of this game, for which they look askance for sponsorships and patronage. They are also waiting for some benefactor Sikhs to come by and donate expensive golfing kits which will enable them to play golf as they are allowed to play at the Golf course twice a week in lieu of their services as caddies.

A disturbing feature of the Sikligar Sikhs is that around 45-50 Sikligar Sikhs are languishing in Yerwada jail in Pune -some for petty crimes and some for internecine murders. There have been cases of extrajudicial killing of a few of them at the hands of the local police and instances of some being forced into crime by the police as they are “blacklisted”. It is my view that the bias of the police in Maharashtra against Pardis, Sikligars and other denotified tribes is also responsible for this kind of unlawful and illegal actions of the police against these sections of society. However, due to the reputation built by the caddies, a section of the Pune police has started viewing the problem of Sikligars as a social problem and not only as a law and order subject alone. A comprehensive report, under the aegis of human rights body Voices for Freedom is under preparation.

Another proud fact about Sikligars Sikhs of Pune is the decade-long work of a 30 year old social activist Bachhu Singh. Bachhu Singh should be rechristened as Bhai Bachau Singh. He has single-handedly saved the lives of around 78 people, so far, who would have otherwise drowned after falling into the unprotected Hadapsar Canal, which carries the water of Moola Mutha river alongside his house in the vicinity of the canal. At great risk to his life, he has removed 118 dead bodies too, not to mention carcasses of dead animals. This Saviour Singh, always a phone call away for the victim families and even the police, has received commendation from small time social organizations in Pune and recognition by the Sri Guru Singh Sabha of Mumbai, but the Maharashtra and India-level government and non-governmental bodies have failed to take notice of this record, which keeps growing, for Bachhu Singh says, “come what may, I am destined to save people and I will continue to do so.” He is training his five year old son and his nephew to be expert swimmers. A leader in his area in his own right, Bachhu Singh says that “Poverty, measly existence in shanties, unemployment and underemployment, lack of counseling and early marriage are our fundamental issues, which force some to take to crime. Education and jobs alone can save them.”

I have made an amateur documentary on the work of two young golfers engaged in undergraduate studies and the Sikligar caddies of Pune and that of Bachhu Singh, which should see the light of the day in the coming months on You Tube. In the video, Ravinder Singh Tak, while speaking to me in chaste

English, which he has painstakingly learnt by himself, said, “We want to put back our notoriety as criminals and I know that we can do it. Our pride as Sikhs is intact and so is our hard working approach. If the Sikh community continues to bless, I would like to become an IAS officer and change the face of my fledgling community.”

**15. “Sikhs are not poor”:** A sizeable percentage of the Sikhs in Punjab live below the poverty line and nearly thirty percent of the Sikhs in Punjab are illiterate. The fact that Sikhs can also be poor is striking like lightning to the Sikhs themselves, government departments and the political leadership of the country. In this regard, I must say that the religious and political leadership of the community at all levels has to redouble its efforts.

According to the 2001 Census, Punjab has only 58.67 percent literacy and as religion wise data for the entire country is available, it may shock us out of slumber to know the literacy rates of Sikhs.

It is a reality, which has been endorsed by the study of the National Commission for Minorities. It would be more than correct to reiterate that the entire Sikligar population, whatever their numbers -in thousands or millions, lives below the poverty line. They are the poorest of the poor.

I have yet to come across a Sikligar Sikh whose daily earnings are more than Rs. 200 and yet to come across someone who gets work for all days of the month.

All spasmodic attempts at empowerment have failed because the population is caught in a vicious circle and the meagre investment of time, money and energy by individuals and organizations does not create the required impact. As leading economist V K R V Rao, once said, “India is poor because it is poor.” I believe that until and unless a major infrastructural and life-changing investment is made by those concerned, we will continue to have the satisfaction of doing something, but not achieving much.

**16. Funding Education of Sikligar Sikhs:** In association with activists from all over the country, the A Little Happiness Foundation is committed to generate resources for 10,000 school going children, 500 college going children and 50 youngsters for specialized education of their choice in the next two years.

**17. Education versus Artisanship of Sikligars:** The one question that bothers me a lot is the relationship between education and loss of artisan qualities of the Sikligars. As it is, time has snatched from them their armoury and ammunition making skill-set, reducing them to repairing drums, buckets,

making locks and keys and other agricultural implements, except amongst those still engaged in weapon-making in parts of Maharashtra.

Now with the young taking to education in a small but sure way, I foresee the disappearance of their traditional artisanship, if no major step to adopt and patronize the same is taken. I invite scholars and activists to inquire into this field too.

**18. The Road Ahead:** As I said at the outset, my approach is not that of a scholar alone, but that of an activist. While delving deep into the lives of the Sikligar Sikhs, and empathizing with them, I am engaged in taking practical steps for transformation, empowerment and education, alongside focusing on areas of research, funding possibilities, activism and volunteerism.

On the basis of the above observations, I venture to mention that for the amelioration of the lives of this section of Forgotten Sikhs, the following areas need immediate attention:

1. Demographic Survey of Sikligar Sikhs.
2. Participation of Sikligar Sikhs in various Employment Schemes of the government for the marginalized sections.
3. Participation of Sikligar Sikhs in various educational loan, scholarships and funding Schemes of the government for the marginalized sections as well as those of non-governmental organisations.
4. Participation of Sikligar Sikhs in various housing and housing - funding Schemes of the government for the marginalized sections.
5. Building health and sanitation needs in the habitat of Sikligar Sikhs.
6. Identification of government rules and regulations and the means to be adopted to procure caste and income certificates and then ensuring their use for education, empowerment and employment.
7. Study and adaptation of Micro-Finance methodologies for overall development of Sikligar Sikhs.
8. Identification and employment of women activists as the women section continues to be largely unattended.
9. Usage of traditional talent of Sikligar Sikhs in making metal crafts.
10. Identification and sponsorship of children of Sikligar Sikhs in education, sports and adult education activities.
11. Training young Sikligar Sikhs in Gurmat missionary activities amongst their own people and in other areas.
12. Involvement and engagement of local Sikhs in programmes for Sikligar Sikhs.

13. Research into the life and times of Sikligar Sikhs, Vanjaras, Satnamis and other marginalized sections.

On the basis of the NCM survey and the work done by various organizations, it is my well-calculated estimate that there are around a 1000 plus deras of Sikligar Sikhs in the country. According to what I have seen and worked, it is my considered opinion that we need at least one educated and trained, fully engaged co-ordinator cum missionary cum educational counselor, handsomely paid and provided with resources to directly touch the lives of the Sikligar Sikhs on a day to day basis, who would live with them, to handle the multi-faceted tasks needed for change and transformation of their lives.

**19. What should the Institute of Sikh Studies do?:** During the course of these travels and while engaging with young concerned Sikhs, the one question that cropped up rather frequently was the non-availability of study material on the Sikligar Sikhs, the Vanjaras, the Satnamis and others. When I attempted to corroborate my field surveys with some work done by someone in the past, I found that there were only the works of Kirpal Kazak and Sher Singh Sher. The Bibliography of these books offers much to read, but there is no more authenticated work than these.

As I propose to continue this journey more closely and in a more detailed manner, I urge the Institute of Sikh Studies to follow up on this Seminar. The IOSS should sponsor time-bound research into the life and times of the Sikligar Sikhs as also deeply ponder over the thirteen-point agenda mentioned above. I am in touch with students from Mumbai, Gwalior and Alwar who are keen to take up such studies but who would require support, sponsorship and patronage.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I profusely thank you for your kind indulgence and I assure you that every single word uttered here would be followed up. God willing, I am determined to continue my journey into the lives of the Sikligars and also to involve others. Much as I am keen to bring them into the mainstream of the Sikh fold, I am conscious of the words of Dr. Himadri Banerjee, the brilliant author of *The Other Sikhs*, from whom I take regular inspiration working for the marginalized sections of the Sikhs that “while it may seem important to bring them into the mainstream, it is pertinent to understand and preserve their uniqueness, which they have so ably been able to maintain over the centuries.”

**20. The Last Word, almost:** Many of the Sikligar Sikhs need the comfort of a reasonable home, the women need the privacy of a washroom, kids need a good environment and better education to grow and prosper, the elderly need

care and medication, but all of them need a life of dignity, an enhanced sense of belonging to the Sikh community and a decent dwelling with no satrap of fear and penury.

I am deeply conscious of the limitations of my preliminary findings and my inability for not adopting proper academic methodologies of cross examination of data. For want of more information, as I said at the outset, oral history and discussions with activists and field visits were the primary sources of information and as the Sikligars have honestly safeguarded their life patterns, traditions and rituals over the last three centuries, I had no reason to doubt what they narrated to me.

I urge you to answer the call of the Sikligars. If we do not answer this call of history, then we may end up adding another century to the story of Forgotten Sikhs. If we unite and the community as a whole responds honestly, honourably and aggressively, we may manage to travel a century back in time and give them the honour and dignity which they have so ably provided us in the past. We do not have a choice, do we?



## 21. References:

1. Oral History recorded at the various deras visited by the author.
2. Discussions with Dr. Himadri Banerjee, Nanak Singh Nishter and activists of various organizations working for the welfare of Sikligar Sikhs.
3. The Sikligars of Punjab by Sher Singh Sher, published by Sterling Publishers (P) Limited, Jullundur -New Delhi, 1966
4. Sikligar Kabeele da Sabyachar by Kirpal Kazak, published by Punjabi University Patiala, 1990
5. Sikligar Kabeele: Ik Nazar by Chamkaur Singh
6. Aa Ab Laut Chalen -Hindi text on background, of Johri Sikh, Lubana Sikhs, Banjara Sikhs and Sikligar Sikhs by Gurmukh Singh "Shaad" 2008, published by AnilSinghji Budhsinghji Bhatti (Johri), Jalgaon
7. Photographs by the author.

## 22. Notes

1. This essay reflects the work of the author upto 2009. Since then, he has covered a lot of ground, visited many more deras, revisited the deras mentioned above and interviewed many old and young Sikligars to research their origin and status.
2. This version of the monograph is without photos.
3. The author has a vast collection of photographs and videos, which require a methodical inquiry into the oral history tradition of the Sikligars.
4. Authors and researchers using information from this monograph are required to acknowledge the same with appropriate reference.

## 23. About the Author

Born in Ludhiana, brought up and educated in Mumbai, with a post-graduate degree in commerce and specialization in Cost Accounting, 52 year old, Jagmohan Singh has been serving the Sikh nation and the people of Punjab for the last three decades.

He was a university teacher for six years in Bombay. He was part of the civil rights movement in Bombay in the early eighties and took active part in many campaigns of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Peoples' Union for Civil Liberties and the Delhi based People's Union for Democratic Rights. He is also a founding member of the Indian People's Human Rights Commission.

After his migration to homeland Punjab in 1989, he was a political activist with the Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) led by Simranjit Singh Mann. As a religio-political activist, he was known for his activism and during this tenure was instrumental in obtaining key amendments to the Sikh Gurdwara Act, 1925, particularly those relating to deletion of voting rights for Sehajdharis and reservation of seats for women. He has authored various documents on Sikh rights.

He is a much-travelled person, having participated in international meets on human rights and religious rights. He has addressed meetings of the Labour party and the Liberal Democratic Party in the UK to impress upon parliamentarians the need of protecting rights of ethnic minorities in the Indian sub-continent. In the year 2005, he participated and spoke at the international conference at Cardoba in Spain on "Anti-Semitism and other Forms of religious intolerance" organized by Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

He has been the Editor-in-chief of a community newspaper published from California and outsourced to Punjab, *World Sikh News*. Though the paper was published in the United States, its reach was global with the [www.worldsikhnews.com](http://www.worldsikhnews.com) incorporating news, views, commentaries and opinion from across the world. He is known to use Open letters as a form of interventionist journalism.

Jagmohan Singh is the Coordinator of the Coalition for Abolition of Death Penalty in South Asia. He maintains liaison with international organizations working for abolition of the death penalty.

He is doing field research on the Sikligars Sikhs and has put together an India-wide coalition of organizations for education and empowerment of this section

of Sikhs, which he calls, Forgotten Sikhs. He is one of the five coordinators for the Forum on Forgotten Sikhs.

He is the Director of A Little Happiness Foundation, which runs Little Happiness Learning Centres for under-resourced children in Alwar (Rajasthan), Agra (2 Centres -Guru Nanak Nagar, Sikandra and Village Punwari) and Kasganj in Uttar Pradesh; Dabra, Gwalior (Madhya Pradesh).

He spares time for health activism and is a campaigner and trustee for a village-based multi-health facility centre in village Mukandpur, 25 kilometres from Ludhiana city, called Sukh Sansar. The range of activities can be viewed at [www.sukhsansar.org](http://www.sukhsansar.org).

He lives in Ludhiana with his parents, wife and two college-going sons. He is proficient in English, Punjabi and Hindi, with working knowledge of Marathi and Gujarati.

***He may be contacted at [alhf.jagmohansingh@gmail.com](mailto:alhf.jagmohansingh@gmail.com)***

**Home:** 351/100-D, J-Block, Bhai Randhir Singh Nagar,  
Ludhiana, Punjab-141012

**Additional email:** [bigideazone@gmail.com](mailto:bigideazone@gmail.com)

**Mobile:** 9316655835, 8591555835

**Home:** 0161.5017608

**Office:** 0161.4625574